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Posted on Fri, Nov. 18, 2005

Go north to Alaska and tap oil reserves

Gale A. Norton

is the U.S. secretary of the interior

America is ignoring the light on the dashboard when it comes to energy.

We are in denial. We think that simply because we've always had abundant energy - except in the 1970s, when we were stuck in gas lines - we always will.

Americans were surprised when growing world demand for energy pushed the price of oil to record levels last summer and when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita drove gas above \$3.60 a gallon in some places. We shouldn't have been. The warning signs of an energy crunch have been there all along.

It's time for denial to end.

As interior secretary, I oversee public lands that hold vast amounts of oil and natural gas that the energy industry has proved can be produced in an environmentally safe manner. As we've become more and more dependent on foreign oil, America has left this oil and gas untapped because of environmental concerns often based in emotion and not in fact.

Take the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a potentially huge source of oil and gas. In 1980, President Carter and Congress set aside this remote coastal plain for oil and gas development.

On Nov. 10, a measure to allow oil drilling in ANWR was dropped from a congressional budget bill. But we can and must develop this area for our energy needs, and I look forward to seeing the provision reinstated in House/Senate negotiations later this year.

Using modern technology, the oil industry can develop this area in winter with little environmental impact. No one would say there won't be any impact at all. Rather, we can limit the footprint of development to an area the size of a regional airport in a refuge the size of South Carolina.

Had we developed this area in the mid-1990s, Americans would have access to the oil from it today.

Unfortunately, emotional arguments and our denial over energy have carried the day for a quarter-century. Opponents show pictures of Alaska, such as the scenic Brooks Range, that aren't even in the coastal plain area, to claim that energy development will despoil a natural wonder. They claim widespread harm to caribou populations, but U.S. Geological Survey studies and experience in other producing areas of Alaska's North Slope indicate responsible development will have little impact on caribou populations. They ignore the incredible technological advances in oil production.

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Likewise, consider the Outer Continental Shelf, which contains huge amounts of recoverable oil and gas that can be easily accessed. Currently, the vast majority of the OCS is off limits to production because of congressional moratoria and presidential withdrawals. Deferring to the wishes of coastal states, President Bush supports the continuation of these moratoria and withdrawals. However, some promising OCS areas not under moratorium or withdrawal could produce billions of barrels of oil and trillions of cubic feet of natural gas.

Offshore oil and gas production has been proven safe. In fact, more than 150 times the amount of oil seeps into the Gulf of Mexico from natural cracks in the seabed than is spilled from offshore production facilities.

Furthermore, these offshore wells endured the rage of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita without any significant spills.

Amazingly, opponents still use the memory of the 1970 Santa Barbara oil spill to convince people to misrepresent the environmental risks in 2005. Again, they ignore the major advances in technology akin to what has happened in fields such as space exploration, medicine, and electronics.

On shore, areas such as the Rocky Mountains potentially hold huge reserves of natural gas that can be developed in an environmentally sensitive manner through coal bed methane technologies. Environmental and energy policies of both Republican and Democratic administrations, dating back more than a decade, have supported development of this clean-burning fuel.

America certainly needs to do better on the energy conservation front. We rose to the challenge and became more energy efficient after the 1970s energy crisis. We must do so again. In an important step, the administration has proposed to raise mileage requirements for light trucks and SUVs in 2007, a decision that will save 10 billion gallons in gasoline over a four-year period.

However, the need to do more for conservation does not obviate the need to tap into readily available energy resources. At a time when our domestic energy production is less than half of our consumption and falling each year, we don't have the luxury to ignore large oil and gas reserves on American soil. We must not let unfounded environmental concerns stand in the way.

Time to get out of denial. We must produce more oil and gas at home. We can do so while protecting our environment.

The Web site address of the U.S. Department of the Interior is www.doi.gov.

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